

From the Wyoming Department of Health

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Influenza Vaccine and Your Health

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Most years, the Wyoming winds and noticeable nip in the fall air can be a reminder that influenza season is on the way. Around this time, public health officials generally begin encouraging people to get immunized before the full force of the flu hits.

This year is different. The full force of flu is here in Wyoming already. It's early, and it's due to the new swine (novel H1N1) influenza strain that began circulating around the world in April. We are seeing widespread flu across the state right now with levels of activity near the peaks we sometimes see in the winter months due to seasonal influenza.

And there is no reason to expect that seasonal influenza won't also start circulating out there as the flu season continues. The 2009-10 influenza season will not be business as usual and will certainly be a challenge as our Wyoming healthcare providers look for the best solutions to keep us as healthy as possible.

Vaccines are the single most effective weapon we have in fighting influenza. This year because of the new flu strain, in Wyoming we will be part of one of the largest vaccine campaign ever planned in the United States. For the best possible protection, people will need to get a special novel H1N1 flu vaccine AND a seasonal vaccine.

In Wyoming, we'll begin receiving the special novel H1N1 flu vaccine throughout October and for several months after. The vaccine will be sent to approved providers around the state with amounts based on population. The Wyoming Department of Health will be ordering the vaccine and local public health officials will be coordinating much of the distribution. The federal government is paying for the vaccine itself; some providers may charge small administration fees.

While we believe enough swine flu vaccine will eventually be available for all our residents who wish to be immunized, it's important to note the first shipments will be relatively small. Certain individuals are at higher risk for complications from this flu strain and we recommend that these people should be first in line for the available vaccine. Target groups include:

- Pregnant women
- Persons who live with or provide care for infants under the age of 6 months (This includes parents, siblings and day-care providers.)
- Healthcare and emergency medical services personnel
- Persons aged 6 months through 24 years
- Persons aged 25 through 64 years who have medical conditions that put them at higher risk for influenza-related complications

I've been asked by many people about the safety of the new vaccine. Influenza vaccines have been available for many years and have a proven track record of safety. Novel H1N1 vaccine is essentially no different. No corners were cut in its development, and clinical trials have not shown any unusual problems or side effects. I have no concerns about ensuring my five- year- old granddaughter will be receiving the vaccine as soon as it's available to her.

I also understand there have been rumors circulating that swine (novel H1N1) flu immunizations will be mandatory. This is simply not true. The Wyoming Department of Health will not force anyone to receive this vaccine.

With the spotlight focused on swine flu, we need to ensure that seasonal flu vaccines are not overlooked. In a typical year, approximately 5 to 20 percent of the population gets the seasonal flu and about 36,000 flu-related deaths are reported. Seasonal flu vaccine is already available around Wyoming and I recommend getting immunized against seasonal flu as soon as possible. Check with your healthcare provider, local health department or public health nursing office to find out when and where to get seasonal influenza vaccine.

The Wyoming Department of Health will continuously monitor this important disease throughout the upcoming season. If and when vaccine recommendations change or new information becomes available about influenza that affects you and your family, we will let you know. Be assured, the health of our Wyoming citizens is my top priority.

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